

Review: Bill Viola at the Grand Palais



A still from Bill Viola's 'Ascension,' 2000, a video/sound installation featuring performer John Coxx. (Photo by Kira Perov)

While sitting at the bottom of the lake, the little boy sees the most beautiful world he could ever imagine. Staggered by the motion of fish, the shafts of sunlight play with the surface of the water and the waving plants. The little boy does not move his body, for if he did, he would disturb the balance of the universe. He just needs to wait for the next thing to happen. And at that exact moment, the little boy feels two strong arms around his tiny waist pull him out of paradise, out of the water. This fairytale-like story is at the base of Viola's fascination with water and things hiding under the surface. It's a good anecdote, whether it's true or not. In the artist's telling, the arms belong to his uncle, who realized that his six-year-old nephew wasn't on board his boat anymore.

Let me make one thing clear: I value Viola's work as a video-art pioneer. Especially his older works, such as *Heaven and Earth*, 1992, in which he marks his mother's death the previous year. In the installation, two televisions face each other so closely that they seem to talk. This intimacy is also present in *The Sleep of Reason*, 1988, in which you see a video of a person sleeping on a small television atop a wooden chest. At random intervals the lights go out, and a nightmare takes over the room with disturbing sounds and flickering images projected on all the walls of the room.

But such delicate and beautiful gestures are, unfortunately, missing in most of this show at the Grand Palais in Paris, which is literally marked by big abstract nouns and pretentious empty

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phrases. The walls illustrate quotes from William Blake about “the doors of perception” and Viola’s own words about “landscapes linking to our outer selves.” The purifying elements of water and fire play the leading roles in the exhibition’s most central videos, *Tristan’s Ascension* and *Fire Woman*, both 2005. Inspired by Wagner’s famous love story, the two works show a person’s transition from material into spiritual form — that is, water. This spectacle is intended to be austere and profound.

But even with 20 works and 50 screens, Viola isn’t able to convince us of his profundity. The exhibition, on view through July 21, could be considered a Greatest Hits Collection DVD, and the complacency of the works seems trite in their overt textbook symbolism. And even if you put on some new tracks, such as *The Dreamers*, from 2013 — in which seven screens present portraits of people peacefully asleep under water — it misses any form of urgency. It’s all so pronounced, his perpetual position of the six-year old, that while wandering through the quiet, dark exhibition halls, I’m longing for two strong arms to pull me out. — **Mirthe Maria Berentsen**